

CHAPTER 1

Purpose and Need; Issues and Criteria



INTRODUCTION

This document is the proposed resource management plan and final environmental impact statement for the Big Dry Resource Area. It incorporates comments and suggestions made on the draft resource management plan and environmental impact statement during the public review period which began in March 1993 and ended in June 1993. The comments made on two newly proposed areas of critical environmental concern during the public review period which began in November 1993 and ended in January 1994 are also included. Minor corrections and additions identified after the draft was published have been made. The resource management plan portion of this proposed final consists of the Preferred Alternative (Alternative D), plus the guidance given in the "Management Common to All Alternatives" section.

Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) responsibility and authority in writing this document are mandated by a series of legal and judicial acts. Some of the Acts are the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (Public Law 91-190), Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 (43 United States Codes [U.S.C.] 315-315r), the Classification and Multiple Use Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-6071), Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-579), the Public Rangelands Improvement Act of 1978 (Public Law 95-514), and the 1974 federal court decision on *Natural Resources Defense Council et al. v. Morton et al.*

This resource management plan and environmental impact statement applies mitigating measures to resolve existing or projected management conflicts. Most mitigating measures are standard operating procedures. The BLM will rely on a review process of this resource management plan and environmental impact statement by individuals, other agencies, and local, county, state and tribal governments in determining consistency or conflicts.

This resource management plan and environmental impact statement, with revisions as necessary, will be the basic planning document for management and for budget requests for the planning area. It contains multiple-use management decisions applicable to public lands and lands acquired by BLM through withdrawal revocation, exchange, or purchase. Management decisions will be consistent with existing laws, regulations, and policy.

The information in this document reflects current policy and regulatory information as of October 31, 1993. After approval of the document, any new policies, regulatory changes, or changes in management direction may require a plan amendment.

BLM will continue to review this plan for consistency with other federal, state, and local government or Indian Tribe planning efforts. If necessary, based on a review for consistency, BLM could amend this resource management plan. Such consistency is an ongoing process which requires BLM to prepare and monitor comprehensive land use plans.

LOCATION OF PLANNING AREA

The planning area is within the Big Dry Resource Area and is analyzed in this document. The planning area encompasses all, or portions of the following 13 eastern Montana counties: Carter, Custer, Daniels, Dawson, Fallon, Garfield, McCone, Prairie, Richland, Roosevelt, Rosebud, Sheridan, and Wibaux (see map 1 in this chapter).

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLANNING AREA

Most of the planning area consists of open expanses of rolling prairie. Some evergreen trees and shrubs grow in the breaks along the Missouri, Yellowstone, and Powder rivers; with hardwood trees growing along the river bottoms.



Remote automated weather station located at Knowlton.

GENERAL LOCATION MAP

Big Dry Resource Management Plan



The semiarid continental climate of the planning area is short summers with moderate to hot temperatures and long, cold winters. The average annual temperature is 45 degrees Fahrenheit. The temperature average for January is 8 degrees Fahrenheit, while July temperatures average 90 degrees Fahrenheit. The growing season ranges from 110 to 150 days per year. Extreme weather variations occur on a yearly, seasonal, and daily basis. Most winters, for short periods, experience temperatures of 40 to 50 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Temperatures ranging from 110 to 115 degrees Fahrenheit may occur during the summer months.

Precipitation averages 12 to 16 inches per year (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], Soil Conservation Service [SCS] 1977). The amounts have varied as much as 15 inches from one year to the next. The largest amount of precipitation occurs April through June, with the remainder of the rainfall arriving as thundershowers during the summer months (U.S. Department of the Interior [USDI], BLM 1982a). In the planning area, rainfall totals 80 percent of the yearly precipitation. The remaining 20 percent arrives as snow during the winter months. The soil is frozen during snowmelt and this moisture contributes significantly to the yearly runoff. The average annual pan evaporation ranges from 25 to 35 inches per year, which affects open water in reservoirs and rivers.

The population in eastern Montana is small and declining. Towns are at least 30 miles apart, with ranches and farms scattered throughout. Interstate 94 is the main transportation route, with Montana State Highways 12, 22, 200, and U.S. Highway 2 being the other major routes. Other state highways and county roads provide access to the remainder of the planning area (see maps 31A,B,C,D).

Principal industries in the planning area are livestock ranching, farming, and oil and gas production. Livestock ranching is usually a cow and calf and/or sheep operation. Farm crops consist of grains, corn, hay and sugar beets. The major oil and gas developments are in Fallon, Richland, Roosevelt, Dawson, and Sheridan counties.

Recreational use along the rivers in the planning area has increased in recent years. There are no BLM-developed recreational areas; however, there are recreational areas developed by other federal or state agencies. At present, there are no areas of critical environmental concern, but several are proposed and analyzed in this document.

Most of the public lands in the planning area are scattered except for six blocks of public land larger than 20,000 acres. These public lands are rich in natural resources, such as wildlife and livestock forage, minerals, cultural resources, paleontological resources, recreation opportunities, and watershed values.

Lands in the Big Dry Resource Area managed by other federal agencies or the Fort Peck Tribes are (see map 1): Fort Peck Indian Reservation (2 million acres), the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (206,976 acres), the Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge (22,742 acres), the Bureau of Reclamation (1,971 acres), and the Fort Keogh Livestock and Range Research Station (9,852 acres).

TABLE 1
ADMINISTRATION AND OWNERSHIP OF LAND
SURFACE AND MINERAL ESTATE
IN THE BIG DRY RESOURCE AREA

| Surface Estate | Mineral Estate | Total Acres |
|--------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| BLM | BLM | 1,645,020 |
| BLM | Private or State | 58,810 |
| Other Federal | BLM | 241,541 |
| Private or State | BLM | 5,735,342 |
| Private or State | Private or State | 7,821,967 |
| Fort Peck | Fort Peck | 2,000,000 |
| Indian Reservation | Indian Reservation | |
| Total | | 17,502,680 |

Figures 1 and 2 show the distribution of surface estate (see pocket maps 31A,B,C,D) and mineral estate (see tissue overlays in the pocket), respectively, in the Big Dry Resource Area.

THE PLANNING SYSTEM

The BLM's planning system is in three distinct tiers (see figure 3). The first tier (**policy**) identifies goals, priorities, and other factors for use in managing the public land resources. Policy is established by public laws, regulations, executive orders, court orders, guidance from the BLM State Director and other approved documents issued by the President of the United States, the Secretary of Interior, and the Director of the BLM.

The second tier (**resource management plan**) establishes combinations of land and resource uses, related levels of investment and production or protection to be maintained, and general management practices and constraints covered by the plan. This final resource management plan and environmental impact statement is part of the resource management plan tier.

The third tier (**activity plans**) provides for the development of plans more detailed, more site-specific, and more limited

FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUITION OF SURFACE ESTATE

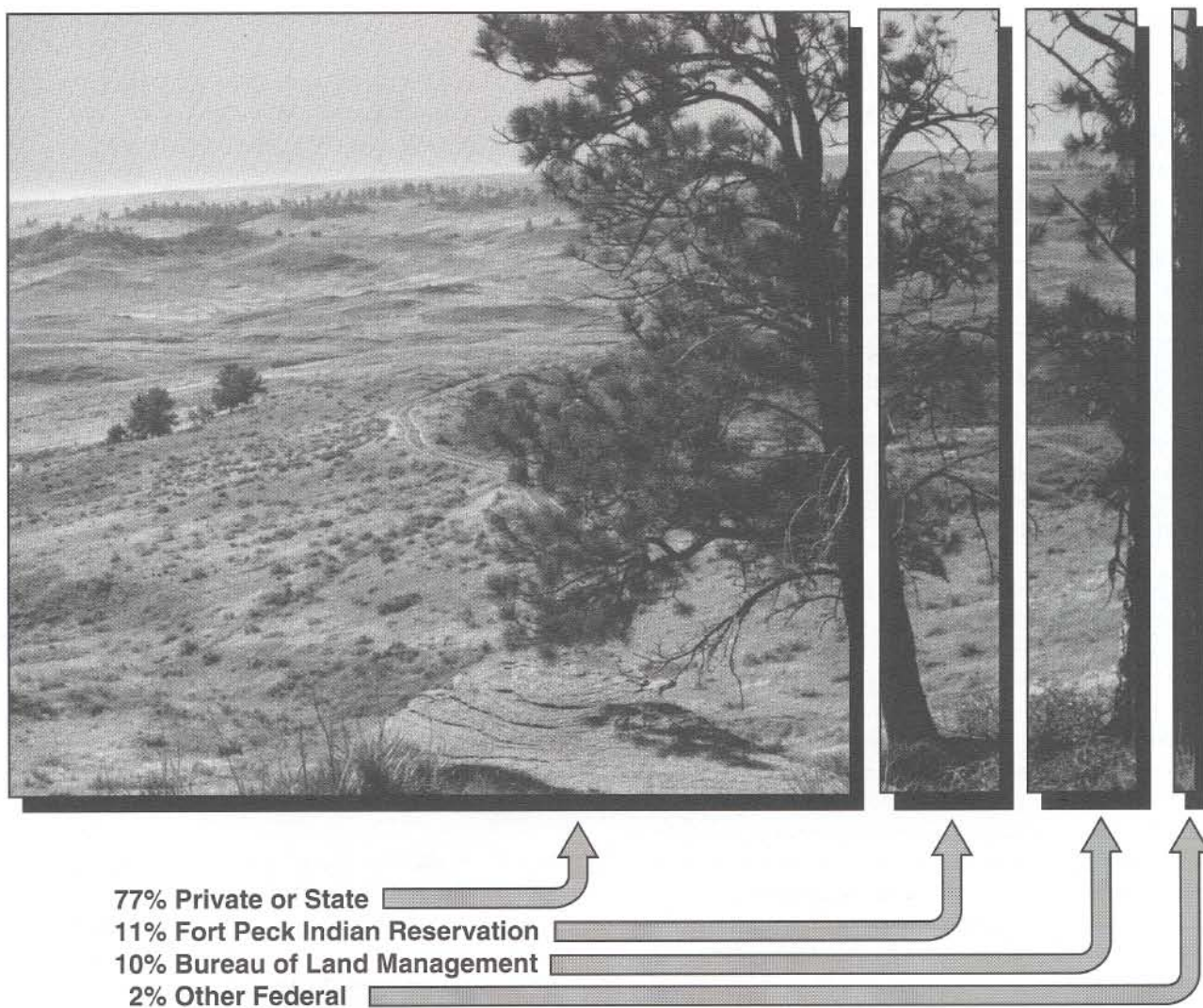


FIGURE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF MINERAL ESTATE

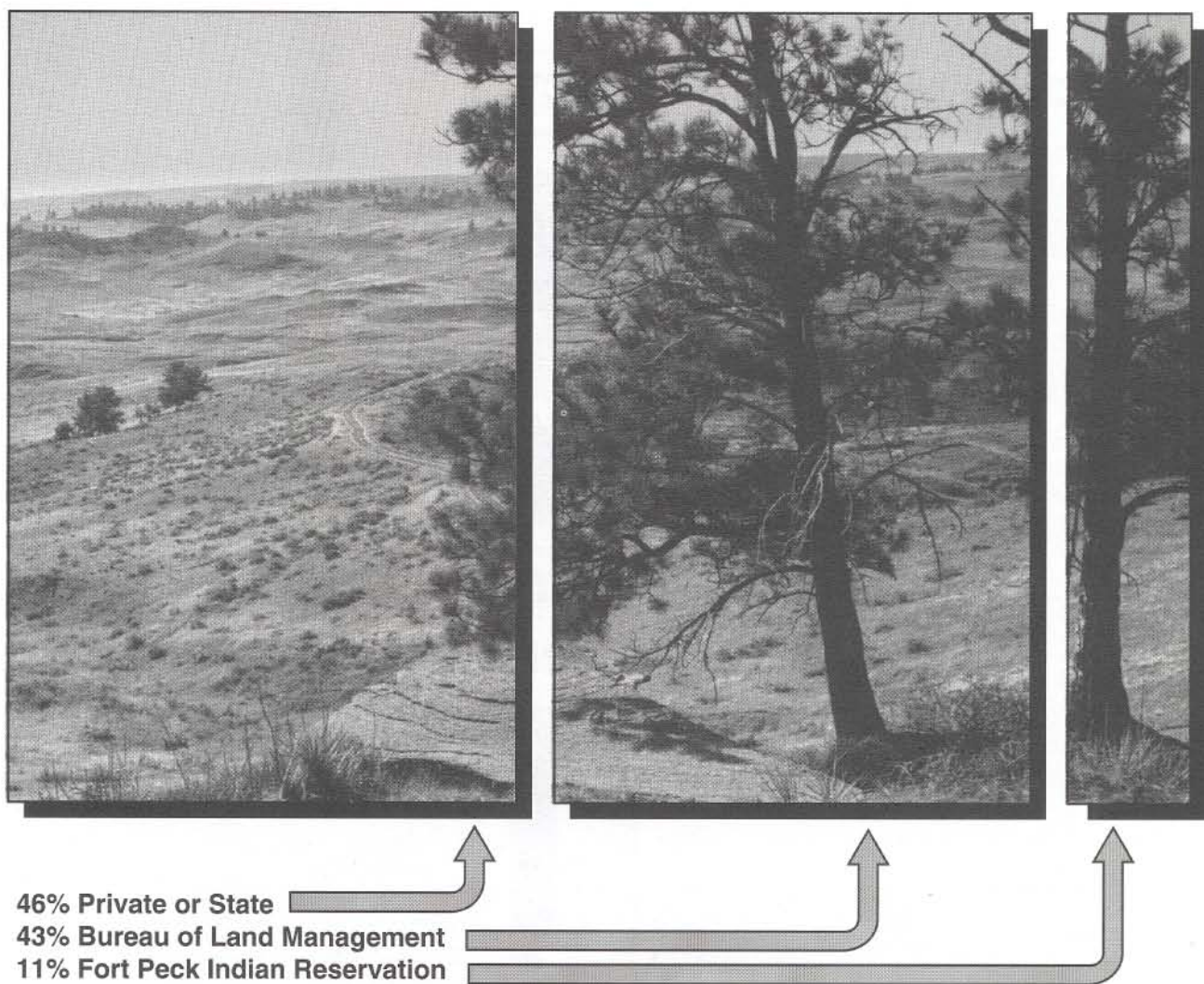


FIGURE 3
BLM PLANNING SYSTEM TIERS



in scope than the resource management plan. A direct result of a developed resource management plan is activity plans. Activity plans show how site-specific actions accomplish the goals of the resource management plan. Some activity plans are allotment management plans, habitat management plans, cultural resource management plans, and use authorizations.

PLANNING ISSUES

Introduction

The BLM's planning regulations focus on land use planning to resolve issues arising over the management and use of public lands and their resources. An issue may be an unrealized opportunity, an unresolved conflict or problem, or a concern about a resource value. The document addresses two issues defined by BLM specialists, state and federal agencies, and the public: (1) special management designations, and (2) accessibility and availability of resources.

The first issue (**special management designations**) applies to those areas that contain special values or resources in the planning area and require special management.

The second issue (**resource accessibility and availability**) refers to the value of, or ability to use, certain resources by improved accessibility and availability. This issue is separate from "access" to public lands that is covered under "Management Common to all Alternatives" sections in chapter 2. Resources must have legal and physical access to be used. The development of oil and gas, other minerals, forest products, recreational areas, and use of public land should be balanced to protect the integrity of other resource values. **Uncontrolled** access to areas could lead to degradation of resource values such as visual, cultural, or vegetative.

Concerns Not Addressed

Some concerns introduced are beyond the scope of this resource management plan and environmental impact statement. Therefore, they cannot be addressed as issues in this document. The following concerns can be mitigated by activity planning, are outside the realm of BLM management responsibility, or are inconsistent with the BLM's multiple-use policy.

Livestock Grazing Fees — These fees are set by Congress. Therefore, they are beyond the scope of this document.

National Guard Proposals — No National Guard proposals for acquisition of land now exist. If a proposal is made

to the BLM, it would require a separate environmental impact statement and plan amendment.

Multi-State Landfills — Proposed multi-state landfills in the planning area, which could affect BLM resources, would require separate National Environmental Policy Act analysis.

Wildlife Population Targets — The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks sets the wildlife population targets. The BLM, or any other interested party, can only make suggestions to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks about these population targets.

PLANNING CRITERIA

Introduction

Planning criteria are the constraints or ground rules used by the BLM to guide and direct the development of a resource management plan. Planning criteria guide the resource specialists in the collection and use of inventory information, in analyzing the management situation, defining and analyzing the alternatives, and selecting the preferred alternative.

Overall Considerations

Private property rights will be respected. The management actions in this plan apply to public lands and minerals only. Where publicly owned minerals underlie privately owned surface, only management actions that are mandated by public law would be enforced, such as the public laws protecting endangered species or cultural resources. Other discretionary actions, such as visual protection measures, would be recommended to the private surface owner to be applied at their discretion.

Baseline social and economic data were compiled from existing published sources, and a study of local economic and social characteristics. Management decisions considered demographic and economic trends related to current and future demands for public resources. They also considered public perceptions and attitudes of BLM-administered resources.

Discussion of standard operating procedures for surface-disturbing activities is in the "Management Common to all Alternatives" sections in chapter 2. These requirements will be applied, as appropriate, to meet resource management goals. In some cases, more specific stipulations were used to further protect the resource. This plan provides resource management direction to carry out a variety of activity plans.

The BLM follows the program guidance provided by BLM's Washington Office 1986 Supplemental Program Guidance (BLM Manual 1620-1625). Management guidance from existing documents is in the "Management Common to all Alternatives" sections of chapter 2.

This document follows present rangeland policy and is consistent with the recommendations and decisions of the Missouri Breaks Grazing Environmental Statement Final (USDI, BLM 1979a), the Prairie Potholes Environmental Impact Statement Vegetation Allocation Final (USDI, BLM 1981c), and the Big Dry Environmental Impact Statement Vegetation Allocation (USDI, BLM 1982b). The purpose of a rangeland management program is to provide guidelines for managing resources and related ecosystems.

The wilderness study process for the planning area was completed in 1991. BLM's recommendations have been forwarded to Congress. Lands in the planning area not designated as wilderness by Congress will return to multiple-use management and will be managed according to the land use planning decisions in this resource management plan and environmental impact statement. Areas designated as wilderness by Congress will be managed according to the Wilderness Act of 1964 and "Management of Designated Wilderness Areas" (43 CFR 8560).

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern and Other Special Management Areas

A Notice of Intent published in the *Federal Register* on October 3, 1989, asked for areas of critical environmental concern nominations. No nominations were received from outside the BLM. Two nominations were made during the comment period on the draft.

AREAS OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN

Within the planning area, 19 nominations for areas of critical environmental concern were evaluated. Twelve of these areas need special management attention and are addressed by alternatives in this document. The Areas of Critical Environmental Concern appendix explains the evaluation process. This section and chapter 2 provide information for the nominations. The areas considered for designation are:

Cultural - The Hoe, Big Sheep Mountain, Powder River Depot, Jordan Bison Kill, Seline sites, Miles/Sitting Bull Cedar Creek Fight, and the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail contain important prehistoric and historic values or resources.

Forestry - An area located in the Terry Badlands Wilderness Study Area is important because of the presence of limber pine.

Paleontological - The Bug Creek, Ash Creek Divide, Sand Arroyo, and the Hell Creek areas have important paleontological resources.

Recreation - Smoky Butte is a unique geologic feature and a regional landmark in eastern Montana.

Riparian/Wetlands - The Ten Mile Creek riparian area has high-yield freshwater springs and related hardwood draws.

Wildlife - An area in Sheridan County provides high-priority habitat for the piping plover, a threatened species.

The black-tailed prairie dog area in Custer and Prairie counties (see map 23) is considered as potential habitat for the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret. In addition, prairie dog towns provide habitat for other species, including the burrowing owl (species of special interest), swift fox (category 2), and the mountain plover (category 1). The BLM proposes a reintroduction site for the federally-endangered black-footed ferret on public lands in Custer and Prairie counties. The determination to reintroduce the black-footed ferret will be a joint decision between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, BLM, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Fox Creek was considered for its fisheries (see map 26).

Bald eagle nests and least tern habitat were considered, as these species are endangered.

OTHER SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREAS

Crucial Winter Ranges - There are 636,265 public acres in the planning area. These scattered areas provide winter habitat for antelope, mule and white-tailed deer, and sage grouse.

Proposed Special Recreation Management Areas - The Powder River Depot, Cherry Creek, Makoshika State Park, Lewis and Clark Trail (Missouri and Yellowstone rivers), and the Calypso areas have recreational values with potential for development.

Riparian/Wetlands - It is BLM's policy to restore and maintain riparian/wetland areas. There are 10,000 public acres in the planning area.

Wilderness Study Areas and Areas Recommended For Wilderness - Seven Blackfoot (20,330 acres); Terry Badlands (44,910 acres); Bridge Coulee (5,900 acres); Musselshell Breaks (8,650 acres); Billy Creek (3,450 acres).